

# Legislative Assembly of Alberta



CANADIANA

JUN - 7 1990

Fact Sheet No. 2

## The Parliamentary System in Alberta

Parliamentary democracy in Alberta is based on principles of government that are centuries old. Some of these are rooted in ancient Greece and Rome, while others developed in Great Britain.

### Ancient Roots

The word democracy comes from two Greek words, "demos," meaning people; and "kratia," meaning rule. The idea that the people should rule developed in Greece about 2,500 years ago. Ancient Greece was divided into small units called city-states, and all citizens assembled to make decisions governing the city-state.

In modern democracies citizens elect people to represent them in the Assembly rather than attending the Assembly themselves. But the basic principle behind democracy, that people have common interests which they can promote through collective action, began in ancient Greece.

### Our British Heritage

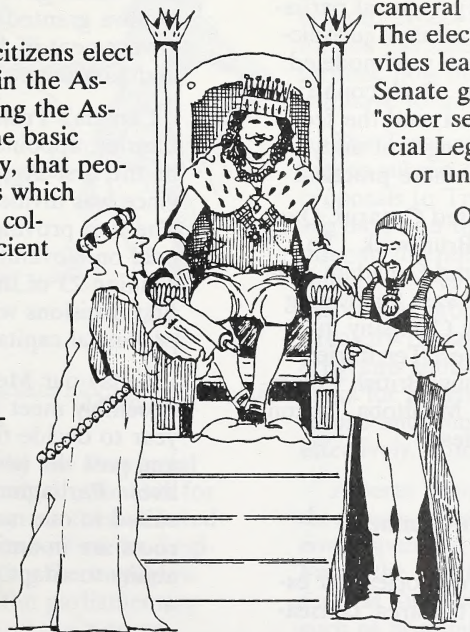
The Greeks gave us the ideas that made the parliamentary system of government possible, but our modern Parliament developed in Great Britain. It came into being because the monarch needed revenue and the citizens

refused to pay taxes unless they had a say in how the money would be spent.

From the 13th to the 19th centuries the British Parliament struggled with the monarch for control of taxation, spending, and law-making. The Prime Minister and cabinet gradually obtained more and more control, while the monarch became a ceremonial head of state, almost routinely approving Parliament's decisions. In the Alberta Legislature today the monarch is represented by the Lieutenant Governor, formally our head of state; the Premier and cabinet govern in the monarch's name.

The bicameral, or two-House, system also originated in Great Britain. The British Parliament split into the elected House of Commons and the House of Lords in the 14th century. Canada has a bicameral system at the national level. The elected House of Commons provides leadership, and the appointed Senate gives the Commons' legislation "sober second thought." Each provincial Legislature consists of a single, or unicameral, elected House.

Our system is based on the British principle of responsible government, meaning that the cabinet must have the support of the elected Assembly to continue governing. Responsible government came to the British Parliament in 1742, when the first Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole, resigned after two of his major policies were defeated in the Commons.





The right of ordinary citizens to elect representatives to Parliament is also part of our British heritage. Local village leaders were called to Parliament as early as the 13th century, although voting rights were only extended to the middle and working classes in the the 19th and 20th centuries.

### **Parliament comes to Canada**

British political institutions were introduced to our part of North America following the conquest of New France (now Quebec) by British forces in 1759. Until 1840, however, a governor appointed by Great Britain ran the colony, assisted by a clique of wealthy English-speaking businessmen and professionals, commonly called the family compact.

There was an armed rebellion against this system in 1837, and Great Britain sent Lord Durham to settle the colonists' grievances. He recommended responsible government, with a cabinet formed from the party holding the majority of seats in an elected Assembly.

Canada's parliamentary system differs from that of Great Britain in that Canada is a federation with a national Parliament and provincial Legislatures. Legislative power is divided between the federal and provincial parliaments, each having its own areas of jurisdiction. Canada's federal system was modeled on that of the United States. Both countries occupy a vast geographic area, and the federal system provided the strength of unity while allowing local control where practical.

Confederation in 1867 united Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. To extend the new Dominion, the Canadian government took control of the vast fur-trading empire of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870, calling it the North-West Territories. The area included what is now British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Yukon and the Northwest Territories.

### **Our First Local Government**

In 1875 the North-West Territories Act established a government for the area, consist-

ing of a Lieutenant Governor and a five-member council, all of whom were appointed by Ottawa. In later years the federal government passed homestead Acts, built railroads, and established the North-West Mounted Police to encourage settlement of the Territories. A population boom occurred between 1901 and 1911, when Alberta's population jumped from 73,022 to 373,943.

The North-West Territories Act also provided for elected council members to replace appointed ones. By 1888 locally elected members outnumbered appointed ones, and the North-West Territories Council became the North-West Territories Legislative Assembly. By this time it had grown to 22 members, including seven from Alberta.

### **Provincehood**

Provincehood naturally followed population growth and elected representation. The settlers were geographically isolated from Ottawa and felt they should manage their own affairs. The territorial Assembly gained control first over taxation and spending and later over the right to make the laws which governed the Territories. Ottawa granted the Territories responsible government in 1897, and in 1905 Alberta and Saskatchewan were created.

Canada's Prime Minister, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, appointed Alexander Rutherford to be the first Premier of Alberta, and the province was divided into 25 constituencies. The first provincial general election was held on November 9, 1905, with the Liberals winning 23 of the 25 seats. One of their first decisions was to make Edmonton the provincial capital.

Today our Members of the Legislative Assembly meet in Edmonton at least once a year to decide the fate of our tax dollars and pass the laws that govern our everyday lives. Parliamentary democracy is well suited to our modern way of life. While its roots are in antiquity, its strength lies in its ability to adapt to a changing world.